



Responsible Conduct in Research Case Study: Mentoring & Ethics

Prepared by:

[Dr. Maria Uriarte, Plant Ecologist](#)

[Dr. Holly Ewing, Ecologist](#)

[Dr. Valerie T. Eviner, Ecosystem Ecologist](#)

[Dr. Kathleen C. Weathers, Forest Ecologist](#)

Chris is a postdoc at the lab of the promising young ecologist, Dr. Know. Pat is a graduate student in the same lab. Chris is a brilliant writer and a very thorough, thoughtful, and creative thinker who also happens to be reserved and shy. Chris often has difficulties verbally articulating thoughts and ideas. In contrast, Pat is articulate, outgoing, and extroverted. People often view Pat as somebody “going places”. Thanks primarily to Chris’s work, Dr. Know’s lab is on the brink of developing innovative theoretical perspectives and laboratory techniques that effectively link evolutionary processes to nutrient cycling in plant communities. Pat’s thesis is in fact a project within the framework generated from Chris’s ideas.

Dr. Know, Chris and Pat all go to the Ecological Society of America meetings. At the meetings, they run into Dr. Vip -- a leader in the field and member of the National Academy of Sciences-- who wields enormous political influence over funding and publishing in the field of ecology. They discuss research and Pat does most of the talking. Dr. Vip is charmed by Pat’s easy, outgoing personality and impressed by the ideas they discuss. Chris adds little to the conversation. Dr. Know walks away to talk to a friend.

On the way back home, Pat tells Dr. Know that Dr. Vip had been asked to give a keynote address at an important conference the following month. Dr. Vip cannot make the date and has asked Pat to deliver the lecture. In addition to exposure at the conference, Pat will be the lead author of a chapter that will be published in the conference proceedings book. The understanding is that the lecture and chapter will be based on the exciting work taking place at Dr. Know’s lab. Pat is thrilled at this opportunity of a lifetime! Dr. Know is also very excited because this conference will bring prominence to the lab. Dr. Know encourages both Chris and Pat to work together in writing the talk and chapter.

Questions for discussion:

- ✓ Are there ethical issues to be discussed about the outcome or evolution of this scenario? If so, what are they?
- ✓ What are the ethical obligations of both Dr. Know and Dr. Vip as mentors to individuals in their labs and as influential professionals in the field in general?
- ✓ What responsibilities do Chris and Pat have towards each other?
- ✓ Does the institution (University to which Chris, Pat and Know belong) have a role to play?
- ✓ Do individuals own ideas?

